



THE BAROQUE CHARACTER  
OF THE  
ELIZABETHAN TRAGIC HERO

by  
LEVIN LUDWIG SCHÜCKING

ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE  
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*Read 27 April 1938*

ALTHOUGH the amount of work that has been done on Shakespeare during the last two hundred years is so great that on a cursory examination all possible points of view seem to have been almost exhaustively dealt with, it is seen on closer observation that certain important aspects of his plays have up to now received rather less attention than they deserve. Shakespearian art, that is to say, has in some ways been considered too much as an isolated phenomenon. This of course does not mean that the investigation of his sources, of his dramatic technique, his language, style, and a number of other essentials has not led to his literary productions being connected with those of his predecessors and of the dramatists contemporary with him and following him. There is, however, a relationship of yet another kind between Shakespeare and the dramatists of his day, namely, one that depends on the general principles that prevailed in his time with regard to dramatic writing. The problem how far he was determined by them in the choice and treatment of his subjects has, to say the least, scarcely ever come to the front of Shakespearian research. But is not a certain literary taste which he shared with his time to be observed in his writings, and would not the perception of the characteristic traits of this taste help us to a better understanding of his work? The question is, *a priori*, to be answered in the affirmative. For even the greatest artist remains with part of his being necessarily a debtor to his time. An architect of the Gothic period could not have been expected to erect buildings in the

Romanesque style. The same talent born within another tradition will produce different works of art. The artist's connexion with the general taste of his epoch may often remain an unconscious one; still, his interest in the artistic problems he busies himself with will scarcely ever be uninfluenced by the world he lives in.

Now it is true that the attempt has been made to turn this point of view to account in some measure by claiming Shakespeare for what is called 'the literary baroque'. This is a comparatively new move in Shakespeare criticism. In earlier days people used to call Shakespeare not a baroque but a Renaissance artist, a characterization in which the word Renaissance was either used in a more comprehensive sense, or called to mind rather a general outlook on life to be discerned in his work than a style, the word 'style' taken in its higher sense, that which we employ in the history of art in talking, for instance, of a Gothic style or Rococo style. Later generations, however, who have been trained to a closer observation of what in the widest scope of the word may be called *form*, naturally felt inclined to recognize in Shakespeare's work the characteristic traits of a distinct period. The criteria of this period were, as the history of the word 'baroque' teaches us, first derived from a phase in the development of the plastic arts. The term had long been employed there as one of opprobrium. It is used so no longer, neither does the transferred meaning which the word has in literary history imply anything particularly derogatory, except that the wonderful striving for increased energy, extraordinary motion, emphasis, plenitude of power, variety, exuberance on the one hand and the tendency to sharp contrast on the other hand, which seem to be the very essence of the baroque style, lend themselves only too easily to a certain mannerism, to empty exaggeration, and straining after effect. There can indeed be no doubt that thus looked at from the point of view of general structure Shakespeare's work, like a great many other phenomena in the realm of both the plastic and the literary arts, may appear

in a new light indeed. It reveals the idiosyncrasy of the time for certain traits common to the productions of painting, architecture, and literature, and evokes something like a general physiognomy of the European mind of the epoch. Results which are gained so easily are, however, of an elusive kind. It is certainly not difficult to find, for instance, parallels between Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Rubens, or Rembrandt. Comparisons between, say, a scene of horror like Rembrandt's blinding of Samson and the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* almost force themselves upon the mind of the onlooker. But we cannot hope in stating similarities of this sort to reach a cogent conclusion as to the characteristic peculiarities of the English literary baroque, still less how far Shakespeare's work belongs to it. This is only possible in trying to ascertain what Shakespeare has in common with the contemporary dramatists regarding certain phenomena that may be looked upon as criteria of style. Now the group to which he belongs consists of playwrights such as Marlowe, Kyd, Marston, Jonson, and Chapman. It is these, then, that have to be examined. The results, it is true, will seem to many to be rather vague and indistinct. The danger is all the greater because the attempt must be restricted to a comparatively small part of their dramatic achievement, viz. tragedy. And even of tragedy only one special element is to be considered here: the Tragic Hero.

Before beginning with the task proper, however, it is perhaps useful in order to see things against their true background to raise the question what the real aim of tragedy in the Elizabethan theatre was. The answer is usually found in theoretical utterances of the time which to a great extent are derived from classical sources. Their connexion with the actual practice of the theatre is, however, of the slightest. Of the real aims of Elizabethan tragedy we should get a better idea if, with the magic art of a Mephistopheles, we could conjure up a vision of the Globe Theatre and enjoy the privilege of witnessing one of its performances. The

direct impression of the variety of effects, of so much gorgeous display, of pompous processions, gaudy costumes, military splendour, shows of different sorts, masks, flourishes of trumpets, accompanying music, and what not, would no doubt lead to the judgement that if a motto were to be coined for this art, it would have to be very similar to Voltaire's famous saying, that every genre is allowed except the tedious. For the spectator is appealed to by almost every possible means. Later on, when much of the tradition of the Elizabethan theatre had already faded, there was still enough of it left to make Dryden confess that the classical French drama with its simple plot and its long speeches was far too monotonous for an English audience. 'We', he sums up his criticism, *'come to be diverted at our plays.'* There can be no doubt that in Shakespeare's time, when the audience was composed of much more heterogeneous elements than two generations later, this desire to be diverted was stronger still. It does not, of course, exclude entertainment in the highest and noblest sense of the word. But all the miracles of Shakespeare's art cannot blind us to the fact that it would betray a very imperfect knowledge of the Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan drama not to acknowledge that often this very desire leads to a kind of performance of a not particularly elevated character. Nor is it a new discovery that the average Elizabethan spectator wants a 'show', that he likes to be dumbfounded, to feel his flesh creep, to shudder, that he is not content with having his mind stimulated and his imagination fed; his nerves, too, long to be lashed up. Fear and pity, the Aristotelian aims of tragedy, are tame ingredients compared with the violent emotions which tragedy is to rouse in him. Worse than that, one cannot read certain passages in the tragedies of playwrights like Marston, Webster, Tourneur, and a number of others without becoming aware of the fact that, in spite of all the wonderful genius displayed, they cater for a taste that by its absence of any reserve towards certain themes, by its love of horror and sensational effects—new 'stunts', so to speak—shows curious

signs of being to a certain degree vitiated. It is true that no problem is more difficult to solve than how far a universal Elizabethan taste is to be discerned at all. Jonson repeatedly complained how varied the judgements of the audience were. Even Shakespeare's art by no means enjoyed an undisputed triumph in his time, as we know from Davies of Hereford's utterance about him. At any rate things seem to have been very different from what we hear of ancient Greece, where individualism on the stage was decidedly more restricted. Euripides' *Phaedra* had to be rewritten because the Greek public took exception to the heroine's shameless offering of herself to her stepson. A similar protest from the Elizabethan public in face of say, dirty scenes, like those in Marston's *Sophonisba* and such-like works, is not recorded. But that the sin of tediousness could not be forgiven is proved by the failure of Jonson's tragedies. Observations of this sort help us to attain the right standpoint from which to judge the mentality of the Elizabethan audience and what at least great numbers of them were looking for at the theatre. There is no doubt that a certain sensationalism is at work here, in principle the same which took on such grotesque forms in the performances of the contemporary 'English Comedians' on the Continent.

Now what in the first line will mirror tendencies of this description is of course the action of the play. The action, however, is inseparable from the character of the hero. So he, too, must betray them. The following argument tries to prove that he indeed does so. It is certainly this love of sensation that best explains a phenomenon of the first importance with regard to him, viz. the rareness of the representation of an ideal character. On the whole tragic heroes in Elizabethan drama are not conceived of as moral patterns. This is surely not a consequence of Aristotle's teaching that the truly good and the perfectly bad man are not a fit subject for tragedy, a precept that fell upon deaf ears even with masters of French classicism such as



Corneille. The reason for the English practice is rather that what is wanted, although it is in the first line *greatness*, must have an admixture of the *sensational*. Otherwise it would be impossible to attain the effects previously mentioned, which the theatre strives for. Characters of this sort are not to be found in everyday life. They need to be created. So dramatic art cannot rest content with mirroring nature. On the contrary, only a drama in which, to apply a well-known utterance in a slightly altered sense, the playwright 'had a strife with Nature to outdo the life', is recognized as the true 'tragoedia cothurnata'. This 'outdoing the life' is, to put it roughly, achieved by heightening the figure of the hero beyond life-size, mostly through an extraordinary intensification of emotional stress. That is why above all the extremely *passionate* individual is chosen for representation, the exhibition of unrestrained passion being the climax of Elizabethan tragedy. How important its part is need scarcely be pointed out. Hamlet's direction to the players as soon as they turn up, 'We'll have a speech straight, come, a passionate speech!' gives voice to what every spectator's principal desire must have been in face of theatrical performers. The audience's preference for 'passionate speeches' is further proved by a number of characteristic remarks in contemporary plays. It is an argument in the same direction that, when an old play, such as the *Spanish Tragedy*, was revised the 'purple patches' newly inserted should have consisted of 'passionate speeches'. That they remained the principal point in the drama, although their diction might undergo in course of time certain alterations, is further shown by Hamlet's advice to the players. For of the many things which might have been urged on them he singles out—except for a few remarks about the clown—the histrionic treatment of violent passion. What is expected from the actor on such occasions becomes particularly clear in that other description in *Hamlet* (II. ii. 588 seq.) how he would

drown the stage with tears,  
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,

Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
The very faculties of eyes and ears.

No wonder, then, that the inspiration of the dramatist himself was called (by Drayton) 'a clear rage', and that the terms 'tragical' and 'passionate' were interchangeable in the language of the time. (It appears to have been thought that in the graphic arts, too, this sort of passion is the proper subject. The passage in the famous addition of the *Spanish Tragedy* points to this, where mad Hieronimo, after proposing to the painter a real whirlwind of violent impressions as subjects for a picture, adds a triumphant 'there you may show a passion! There you may show a passion!')

Now the well-worn word 'passion' may cover very different things. In many cases, but not always, a certain theoretical knowledge of the characteristic structure of the four temperaments seems to be implied. It has, for instance, lately been plausibly advanced that one of the most influential figures of Elizabethan drama, Marlowe's Tamburlaine, with his monstrous pride, wilfulness, hot temper, rashness, quarrelsomeness, cruelty, love of display, and boldness mirrors the contemporary notion of the choleric man. Marlowe must have been consciously personifying this type in his hero. The authors of the *Spanish Tragedy* and its additions, on the other hand, knew a good deal about the current idea of melancholy. They represented a particularly high-minded person of considerable intellectual standing—one must not forget that melancholy, like its eighteenth-century successor the 'spleen', is the brain-worker's complaint—who by the murder of his son is thrown into an abyss of depression, out of which he is quite unable to arise again. By wholly abandoning himself to his misery and grief he appears to the outsider as one who, as his wife Isabella reproaches him in the play, 'seeks means to increase his sorrow'. The point in both cases is not, however, that a certain temperament is more or less faithfully depicted, but that its driving forces are represented on an extraordinary,

an unprecedented scale. Cholerick Tamburlaine's attitude towards the world becomes that of a demon, whereas Hieronimo completely loses control of himself, and shows signs of madness. We find a very similar portrait, depicted in the most glowing colours imaginable, in Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*. Here the melancholy of the hero frequently borders on hysterical derangement. Antonio is almost always dissolved in tears, and, to use his own fine characterization, goes about 'wrapt up in clouds of grief'. On receiving bad news he again and again falls paralysed to the ground, groans, howls, bewails himself, and indulges in unheard-of eccentricities. In this case, too, the author must be credited with a certain knowledge of the pathological elements in the disposition which he describes: occasionally, when fortune seems to smile upon Antonio he, as is the case with such persons, for a short while feels in the seventh heaven of delight, his bliss being just as ecstatic as was formerly his misery. It is only after his father's ghost has entrusted him with the revenge for his murder that he ceases to be the plaything of his over-powerful passions, gains a certain manly resolution, and shows the necessary greatness by taking the lead in the action of revenge. These cases are particularly interesting. In what period of literary history except the Elizabethan would it have been possible to select characters of this sort as heroes of tragedy? Nor can it be objected that they are exceptions, for the principle underlying the creation of such figures is noticeable even among those playwrights who pride themselves upon being superior to all sensationalism and subservience to the common multitude, who profess to abhor such aberrations of imagination as are to be found among the popular dramatists and prefer to side with the ancients, that is, dramatists such as Jonson and Chapman, whose literary 'Palladianism' has come to be looked upon as an undisputed dogma of criticism. But a closer observation of the facts shows that many of the primary constituents of their art differ hardly at all from those of the other art already dealt with. It is

most characteristic of Jonson, for instance, that he should have selected for the heroes of both his tragedies morally hideous creatures such as Sejanus and Catiline. Still he might have treated these figures in a realistic way. However, examining the last-mentioned tragedy, which he himself considered to be his most perfect one, we find that it scarcely corresponds to what we should call realistic drama. It is true that he carefully utilized his classical sources, but what has become of the hero! He may be driven to his awful actions by thirst for revenge and unsatisfied ambition. An ambition so strong as to 'offer violence to nature's self' is what Cicero in the play considers as his leading passion. But both these intelligible and human incentives recede far into the background before his hyper-pathetic craving for destruction. A perverse and mad desire dominates him to wipe Rome from the surface of the earth. He is impatient to have, as he paradoxically describes it, 'her ashes in an urn'. He revels in the expectation of unspeakable horrors. In a kind of sadistic intoxication he visualizes to himself the return of Sylla's most gruesome atrocities when not the infants, matrons, nor pregnant wives were spared, and 'the graves were filled with men yet living, whose flight and fear had mixed them with the dead'. When he gives orders for the destruction of his adversaries the practical end of the measures he plans is hardly noticeable beside the wild joy with which he looks forward to the perpetration of crimes such as the world has not yet seen. It is precisely in such moments that he feels like a god. Beyond earthly dimensions he is indeed elevated in the description of his death for which Jonson uses a passage from Claudianus' *Gigantomachia* which shows the fighting giants turning to marble at the deadly sight of the Medusa. Now this figure who parades in bombastic speeches his titanic strength of will and a malignity exceeding all human bounds is not a character that can be measured by human standards. Jonson's Roman plays have often been contrasted with Shakespeare's and held up as models, if not of consummate art still of extreme faithful-

ness to history, but so far as the hero of this tragedy is concerned all the details which have been so painstakingly collected by Jonson from the ancient writers cannot blind us to the truth that it is certainly not the great conspirator Lucius Sergius Catilina whom we see on the stage, but a monster whose dramatic existence would again be impossible in any other period of literary history. It is of secondary importance in this connexion that it is Seneca's Atreus, the superhuman hero of *Thyestes* come to life again.<sup>1</sup> The point is that the tendency to heighten the intensity of human feeling to the utmost extreme in this tragedy is so obvious. It seems irrelevant, in face of this, that so much else is painted with realistic colours.

A very similar case presents itself in Chapman's tragedies. From several examples which might be selected we choose the *Conspiracy and Death of Byron*, because the author has here only a single source, Grimeston's Chronicle, which he on the whole closely follows. He found in it a very lively portrait of the hero, and if his intention had been to produce a realistic drama he might have kept to it. But even in depicting an almost topical event he felt compelled by the spirit of tragedy to go to the utmost lengths in the delineation of the hero's passionate character. These things have perhaps not always been seen in the right light. Parrott, in his scholarly edition of this tragedy, thinks that Chapman in his description of Byron's treacherous struggle against King Henry IV wanted to represent the tragic conflict between unlimited Renaissance individualism and the super-individual idea of social order. But it seems doubtful whether conceptions of this sort ever entered the dramatist's mind. It is much more probable that the subject pleased him simply because it enabled him to put on the stage the latest variant of a type of hero with well-known traits, the 'great' man who is constantly being driven on

<sup>1</sup> His words to himself (II. 17, 18), 'Age, anime, fac, quod nulla posteritas probet | sed nulla taceat', are reverberated in almost every line of Catiline's soliloquies.

by his vehement temper, which in this case, as so often, assumes the shape of an insatiable ambition, leading him on the road to ruin. Chapman's source describes Byron as a man of abnormal self-assertiveness, exaggerated pride in his military merits, and a quite unusual irascibility. We hear, moreover, of his general discontent and the dissatisfaction which he felt at the King's reward for his valour. Out of this discontent Chapman develops a certain pessimism and moral scepticism of which his source knows nothing. In this way his physiognomy is characteristically assimilated to the 'Malcontent' type, at that time prevalent on the English stage, and the King's interpretation of him is justified: 'he flows with adust and melancholy choler'. But much more significant for the dramatic idiosyncrasies of the time is Chapman's method of abandoning his source and hyperbolizing his hero's principal quality, his conceit and presumption. For in his play the Duke's self-glorification and vainglory border on megalomania. One doubts, indeed, if he is still in his right mind when he contemptuously snatches a portrait which the Duke of Savoy's painter has been commissioned to paint of him out of the artist's hands and declares that he will order instead a high mountain in his dukedom to be worked into his likeness to leave a worthy monument of himself that would last for eternity. This idea, as Parrott remarks, comes from Plutarch, where a similar Greek plan is mentioned to commemorate no less a celebrity than Alexander the Great. The example shows the hero's fantastic and extravagant form of overweening pride and boastful behaviour. Again, we should be at a loss to understand the character, did there not loom up behind it the attitude of Seneca's heroes with their godlike qualities and bearing.

The number of heroes we have hitherto been dealing with is, it is true, comparatively small. It would not be difficult, however, to enlarge it by a good many more instances of excessively passionate characters. Still the objection might be raised that not all tragic heroes belong to

this class. The example of the protagonist of Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois* might be quoted, the figure of Clermont d'Ambois, who quite obviously is created to personify the hero without passion, the so-called 'Senecal Man', that is, the perfect stoic. At first sight this character seems, indeed, to form a striking contrast to the representatives of passion. Examined more attentively, however, his spiritual aspect shows a curious resemblance to that of heroes like Byron or Bussy: only it is all just the other way. If in them emotion was carried to extremes, the degree of imperturbability that he has attained is equally extreme. No misfortune robs him of his 'cheerful patience'. Philosophy has so thoroughly ennobled him that he is rightly looked upon as a phoenix by those around him, whom he keeps regaling profusely with his gleanings from classical authors. 'He speaks all principle', as his admirers say. In situations which in an ordinary mortal would call forth emotion, as for instance when the ghost of his murdered brother appears to him, or when he is suddenly and treacherously taken prisoner and to all appearances has to face immediate death, or on being told that the lady who is nearest to his heart has become blind with grief because of his imprisonment—her outbreak of despair supplies the indispensable passion scene (rv. iii)—he is instantly ready to enlighten the others by a little philosophic lecture, the arguments of which are borrowed from Seneca or Epictetus. Nay, he is so much superior to all earthly things that he acknowledges platonic love only and disdains the idea of marriage. There can be no doubt that this character has the same oversharp outlines which we know only too well already, and his moral philosophy is just as obtrusive as his brother Bussy's and Duke Byron's vainglory. There is, to come to the point, an element of extravagant exaggeration about him that exalts him just as much above reality as those characters whose immense excitability is the reverse of his equanimity. To him, too, in a certain sense Jonson's words about Catiline might be applied, that he 'offers violence to nature's self'.

Now the question is how far Shakespeare's tragic heroes, who were determined to impress the same public, are subject to the principle which is at the root of these creations. For evidently among the playwrights of this time there is a very powerful 'Stilwille' to be discerned which is far distant from mere realism and which implies an idea of the sublime in tragedy by no means coinciding with the conception of other ages. It seems, indeed, that in some important aspects Shakespeare worked on the same lines. This has often been misunderstood and his intention consequently misconstrued. Especially the idea of the noble nature of his heroes has been put too much in the foreground. A scholar to whom recent Shakespeare criticism owes so much as Professor E. E. Stoll, for instance, denies that Hamlet was first of all intended as a study in the passion of melancholy and says that 'he was meant to be an ideal character', and that Shakespeare did not mistake the theatre for a clinic or look upon the milieu of tragedy as fit for a humour. As regards these arguments it should be sufficient to point to the example of Marston's Antonio, who, as nobody looking at him from the standpoint of modern medical science will deny, shows many more distinct pathological traits than Hamlet; and as regards the question of 'humour' in tragedy, it is noteworthy that in the introduction of the same play the author speaks of it as a product of his 'humorous blood'. But even apart from that the examples we have been pointing out suffice to show how nearly related the Jonsonian conception of 'humour' in comedy is to the principle underlying the theory of the tragic hero. The whole question is, when all is said, a problem of style. The style, as we have tried to show, does not require in the first line the representation of an 'ideal character', otherwise the rest of the Elizabethan dramatists would not have hesitated to put such characters on the stage too. What the style required was more than everything else the 'great', the impressive, and the interesting character, and him they found especially among the addicts



of passion. That is why an interpretation that sees in the heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies principally ideal personalities who through various circumstances have got into tragical situations in which they perish, does not look at things from the right angle. This should no longer be a subject of dispute, since so excellent a book as Lily Campbell's *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes Slaves of Passion* has put the idea of passion in the foreground. Indeed Shakespeare's conception of tragic passion becomes clear—to restrict ourselves here as elsewhere in this paper to his four great tragedies—when Hamlet's melancholy causes him to behave like a madman, witness, for instance, his behaviour at Ophelia's grave; or when Othello at Iago's terrible disclosures falls to the ground in something that looks like an epileptic fit and remains in this state long enough to make Iago fear that he might, if treated the wrong way, become frantic; or when Lear's health definitely gives way owing to the volcanic outbursts of his wrath; or when feverish agitation makes Macbeth lose his nerve and see a hallucination in the air. A stronger display of passion is not imaginable. If its expression has become more refined since Titus Andronicus's

My bowels cannot hide her [i.e. earth's] woes,  
But like a drunkard must I vomit them

its violence has certainly remained the same. This violence has become a kind of stage convention for certain situations. There is, for instance, nothing extraordinary in the good man's flying into a paroxysm of fury in scolding the bad one. He is entitled to give full vent to his indignation, and is not blamed even if, in his burst of anger, he visibly overshoots the mark. In such a state of mind terms of invective may be used which appear excessive to posterity. But in the opinion of the time, to be beside oneself in such circumstances is only natural. That no moderation in the damnation of wickedness is necessary, but that you are allowed to open the flood-gates of your wrath as wide as possible in cases of this sort, is shown by examples such as Marston's

*Malcontent*, the good Kent in *King Lear*, the King himself, and others. They all act according to the motto: 'Anger has a privilege' (*King Lear*, II. ii. 73; *King John*, IV. iii. 32). This convention has, it seems, not always been rightly interpreted. When Mr. T. S. Eliot, for instance, in an admirable article complains that in Hamlet's address to his mother 'the adequacy of the external to the emotion' is wanting, or that 'his emotion is in excess of the facts as they appear', he seems to me, if I do not misunderstand him, to apply a standard which is taken more or less from the realistic art of another period. The passion of Elizabethan tragedy is, as we have seen, always several degrees more fiery than would appear natural at any other period. Hamlet, too, can claim '*the privilege of anger*'.<sup>1</sup>

However, although Shakespeare in this point shares with his contemporaries a stage convention which is most characteristic of the period, he has on the whole a way of using passion in his drama that diverges considerably from theirs. He, too, loves the extreme; he, too, delights in representing unheard-of explosions of emotion, but he does not, to use Jonson's words again, 'offer violence to nature's self'; in other words he keeps passion as far as possible within the boundaries of the natural. This becomes particularly evident in cases where he visibly aims at similar effects and

<sup>1</sup> There exists, by the way, a curious parallel to just those lines from *Hamlet* which Mr. Eliot alludes to (III. iv. 50 seq.) in the speech which Montsurry in *Bussy d'Ambois* addresses to his guilty wife, in which he, too, makes his grief an affair of the universe:

Now is it true, earth moves and heaven stands still;  
Even heaven itself must see and suffer ill . . .

which sounds like an imitation of Shakespeare's

Heaven's face does glow  
Yea, the solidity and compound mass,  
With tristful visage as against the doom,  
Is thought-sick . . .

But very likely Chapman's passage is the earlier one (cf. W. J. Lawrence, *T.L.S.* 30. i. 37).

follows the same classic example. Take, for instance, the figure of Lady Macbeth. When she implores the powers of darkness to 'unsex' her and to fill her from top to toe with cruelty, one feels in doubt whether a being of flesh and blood could utter enormities of this sort, exactly as one does when Jonson's Catiline revels in the idea of fiendish atrocities to be done. In both cases Seneca's pattern is imitated. Lady Macbeth's words almost verbally repeat Medea's appeal to the demons: 'Exile all foolish female fear and pity from my mind—And as th' untamed tiger's use to rage and rave unkind.' But, unlike Jonson, Shakespeare does not forget that the character is in danger of losing its interest for the spectator unless its human quality—in this case that of woman—be somehow restored. That is why he makes her break down entirely later on after the murder, and why he shows by the sleep-walking scene that in acting the Fury she had been vastly overtaxing and ruining her nervous system. By such means the character remains human, becomes complex, is equipoised, and our belief in the dramatist's psychology is re-established. Or take the case of *King Lear*. Looked at from a certain point of view the problem of the drama is not at all dissimilar to that of Chapman's *Tragedy of Byron*. In both plays—that of *Coriolanus* might be added—the hero shows greatness, a strong spirit, an immense pride, absolute blindness to the standpoint of others, pretensions, the rejection of which produces a wild and furious passion, a boundless mortification, bitterness of heart, which taken together lead to resolutions ending in destruction. There is a certain sublimity in this fight of the great absolutely self-centred individual for what he considers to be his natural right. However, in Chapman's play the tragic core is wanting, for his hero lacks the admixture of noble human qualities which make Lear's fate, in spite of all his faults, a source of endless compassion to the spectator. This, then, is Shakespeare's secret: he, too, presents the required exalted and passionate character to the spectator, and shows him in

the grip of the mental tempests the audience expects; but in Shakespeare's case this passionate character is complex, the composition of his qualities being such as to evoke tragic pity, and his actions remain in accordance with his psychological structure. Comparing Shakespeare with contemporary dramatists in regard to his use of passion one is reminded of a judgement which the modern historian of art pronounces on the relation of Michelangelo to the painters of his time: 'He lives', the critic says of the great Italian, 'in a period which cultivates movement at any price. But while with him in most cases it is the symbol of a genuine strong emotion, among the Mannerists it became routine-work done according to a fixed formula.' (Weisbach.)

It is not, however, the dynamic element alone that characterizes the mentality in the drama of this time; of almost equal importance is another trait already touched upon occasionally, namely, the inclination to deviate from the ordinary. It seems to have a strange charm for the Elizabethan to look at the world through the eyes of characters who speak from a—to say the least—very detached standpoint. In a sporting mood they even go so far as to maintain that there is no such thing as an ordinary mind, at least not in England, 'Everyman' having 'his humour', and every profession resting on a kind of monomania (cf. Shakespeare's 'The scholar's melancholy which is emulation . . . the musician's which is fantastical . . . the courtier's which is proud,' &c.). Or the humorous personage such as the witty Bilioso in Marston's *Malcontent* compares the European nations and comes to the conclusion that 'amongst an hundred Englishmen there are four-score and ten madmen', a percentage outbidden, however, by the grave-digger in Hamlet. Now the taste for extravagances to which jocose remarks like these point, finds ample expression in the serious dramatic art of the period with its leanings to an ironic, sarcastic, or eccentric attitude, its delight in paradoxical, savage, or delirious utterances,

its representation of states of mind that range from agitation and almost pathological 'ecstasy' to what is termed 'raving' and to sheer madness. This is what might be called the *bizarre* element of Elizabethan drama. Sometimes the playwrights seem to be conscious of it as a modish peculiarity. Marston, for instance, prefaces his *Antonio and Mellida*, a play that is in many ways akin to *Hamlet*, with the most promising remark, 'I will be fantastical', i.e. eccentric. What he understands by it is partly explained by scenes in the same play which have already been described. But they are by no means the most extravagant ones. Imagine, for instance, Antonio in his usual position, that is, lying on his back, in perfect apathy, and old Pandulpho, half mad with grief, carrying the corpse of his murdered son in a winding-sheet to this spot and dropping it upon the breast of the hero with the words:

Antonio, kiss my foot: I honour thee  
In laying thwart my blood upon thy breast!

and Antonio suffering it without a word, only voicing from time to time his own despair from underneath the gruesome burden with monotonous complaints! Although this exceeds anything in Shakespeare, he too might have introduced his Danish tragedy—and not only that—with the same motto. Lifelong knowledge of this feature of Shakespeare's tragic work has to a certain extent dulled our sense of it. As it is an integral part of the greatest achievement of dramatic art which the world knows, we have come to accept it and to wonder no longer at points which in themselves have an element often bordering upon the grotesque, whereas quite similar things found among the lesser known of his contemporaries rather bewilder us. However, it is interesting to see that in spite of our taking for granted so much that is extraordinary in Shakespeare's tragedy, again and again among its interpreters a certain unconscious spirit of revolt betrays itself; the tendency, natural to a more realistically thinking period, makes itself felt, to soften down

colours that are too glaring, to smooth over what appears too extravagant, and to construe what appears too improbable in a sense that makes it more palatable to the ordinary modern mind. In many cases there is no possibility of this. Others, however, seem to admit of two constructions. A few cases will make this clear. Take Othello. Many critics have taken exception to the idea of a regular negro as hero of the tragedy and, like Georg Brandes, have done their utmost to prove that Shakespeare cannot possibly have thought of a real blackamoor, but that he must have had in his mind a native of Morocco. It is superfluous to point out that they were wrong, which is sufficiently proved by expressions such as 'thick-lips', 'sooty bosom', and others. The important thing is that the case is so typical of the misunderstanding of the style to which Shakespeare's art belongs. For it is just this blackamoor who serves his purpose and corresponds to the general principle of his art which, in harmony with the taste of his time, favours the extraordinary. Even a man like Corneille declares that the theme of a fine tragedy should always be '*au delà du vraisemblable*'. Besides, it must have fascinated Shakespeare's wonderful sense of paradox and tempted him like nothing else to make what is psychologically most improbable appear credible by the magic of his art. These are the daring tasks which he loves to set to himself. The bizarre element, however, need not lie in such things as the black colour of the hero—although the value of a black lover in making people wonder and prick up their ears from the beginning was not to be underrated—it could also consist in the bold experiment of a character with a strongly marked mixture of qualities of which the one seems almost to preclude the other.

So he creates a hero such as Macbeth, who is a moral coward and for a while a henpecked husband, who in critical moments is rebuked like a schoolboy by his wife and who, on the other hand, proves himself a lion on the battlefield. Or the same character is brutal enough to murder

his crowned guest, but retains notwithstanding the nobility of spirit—or superstitious fear of fate?—to feel the disgracefulness of assassinating his victim in his sleep so deeply as to become possessed of the idea of having incurred the punishment of eternal insomnia. In this case, too, the interpretation has only too often missed the meaning of the author. By unduly simplifying the complicated psychological facts it has done less than justice to the wonderful and unique results of that hazardous antithetical character-construction which was favoured by the style of the time.

An example of a different kind is provided by the introductory scenes of the *Lear* tragedy. To make an old king, who is apparently still in his right mind, commit the gigantic folly of distributing his realm to his daughters in proportion to the bombast of their declarations of filial affection for him, is at first sight so paradoxical a venture that even a critic of the rank of a Coleridge believed it necessary to find a special reason for it. He saw it in the fact that the story being an old and well-known folk-tale had long before lost its strangeness and improbability for the audience. But this argument appears to be more than doubtful. Shakespeare wanted in this tragedy to show titanic passion with its wildest eccentricities, and for this purpose the king had to prove himself from the very beginning the extravagant character on whom the whole plot of the tragedy depends.

As a third and last example the case of *Hamlet* may be mentioned. It is particularly striking. *Hamlet* is a melancholy character. The critic who tries to make him as normal a person as possible sins against the spirit of the Elizabethan epoch. For melancholy as a product of grief entitled a man in the eyes of the Elizabethan audience to the craziest attitudes. Kyd's *Hieronimo*, Shakespeare's *Titus*, Marston's *Antonio* and *Pandulpho*, bear ample witness of this. It is the most natural thing on earth to see the melancholy man scandalized at the wickedness of the world, and to hear him condemn the human race in general and

womankind in particular. Why, then, should Hamlet—as has been maintained—have a special reason for it which other melancholy characters have not, in a certain sex-nausea, occasioned by his mother's moral frailty? Another instance is offered by the nunnery-scene of the tragedy. Professor Dover Wilson is shocked by the Prince's indulging in utterances towards a harmless and innocent girl which cut her to the quick. So he assumes that Ophelia has blackened her character in her lover's eyes beforehand. Hamlet, he thinks, must have previously overheard the eavesdropping arrangement between her and her father. This in itself is to the modern spectator eminently plausible. But the question is, again, if a special reason be really necessary for the behaviour of a melancholy hero whose very peculiarity consists in his revelling in the most astonishing eccentricities. The propensity for the bizarre, as one of the most outstanding features of the style of this period, nowhere becomes more obvious than in such things, unless it be in the by no means unusual converse of melancholy people with corpses and skeletons which reaches its artistic climax in Hamlet's visit to the churchyard, where he, with a certain morbid enjoyment, handles skulls which have not yet lost the smell of putrefaction and ponders upon repulsive details of decomposition. The odd effect of the stage being turned into a cemetery which is, so to speak, in full operation, is, by the way, soon after capped by Dekker (*The Honest Whore*), who introduces into his drama the inside of a madhouse with all its terrors, a scene which constantly recalls Shakespeare's play. The difference between his art and that of the others lies, here as elsewhere, not so much in the kind of device itself as in his brilliancy of thought and in the consummate art of his character-drawing.

In trying to determine some of the most outstanding features which compose the physiognomy of the Elizabethan Tragic Hero we have up to now passed by one which demands special consideration. We have seen that the tragedy of the time requires characters of a certain 'greatness'.



Dramatic art has, partly in imitation of Seneca, found a comparatively easy way of throwing this greatness into relief. It consists in a self-glorifying attitude, in making an exhibition of this quality which shows itself in such things as pretended strength of will, indifference to suffering, general superiority, and the consciousness of unique achievements either already performed or to be performed in the future. This often leads to utterances that to the modern reader appear as bombastic rant. But in the words of an American author, 'not all noisy self-exaltation in Elizabethan drama is mere vainglory'. No bounds are in fact set on the stage to the proclamation of your own merits, the only condition being that you make good your words if the occasion for it arises. This leniency towards grandiloquence seems to be a characteristic common to the drama of the whole period. Nor is it limited to England. Even Corneille's tragedy, which before everything aims at exciting admiration for its heroes—a point in which Chapman's drama shows a certain resemblance to it—reverberates with statements in which his leading figures pride themselves on their 'grande âme', 'cœur magnanime', or 'grand cœur', an absolute hero like the young Cid making no exception to it. (The importance of the trait for the 'Heroic Tragedy' of the Restoration epoch need not be insisted upon.) As it proceeds from the predilection of the period for a *majestic bearing* it corresponds to the pomposity of costume and deportment which already at this time make themselves felt on the stage. (Even the unique small sketch of a scene from *Titus Andronicus* which Sir E. K. Chambers has published gives a fair idea of it.) This is the 'heroic' element in the proper sense of the word, which is by no means limited to noble characters. The speeches of Marlowe's, Jonson's, or Chapman's heroes are full of this sort of frank self-praise. Vainglory and 'heroic' self-exaltation are sometimes as like as two peas. Sejanus, for instance, says of himself:

Great and high

The world knows only two, that's Rome and I.

Catiline lives in what looks like continuous self-idolatry. The scenes that are designed to show such big words accompanied by great actions only too often strike the modern reader as being—to say the least of them—most theatrical. When Chapman's Bussy d'Ambois, for instance, who has again and again mentioned his own greatness and glorified himself in an unendurable way, is about to die in a situation, which, looked at from a moral standpoint, is by no means edifying, he calls out:

If Vespasian thought in majesty  
An emperor might die standing, why not I?

And when he is offered help he shows not only his accurate knowledge of Suetonius, but also his sublime aloofness from every weakness by adding:

Nay, without help, in which I will exceed him;  
For he died splinted with his chamber grooms.

Of this phenomenon many examples might be quoted.

Very similar and particularly instructive, if not belonging in the strictest sense to the hitherto discussed Shakespearian group, is the case of Webster's *White Devil*. That Vittoria Corombona is absolutely heartless, a courtesan, and a criminal, is forgotten in face of the heroic attitude she strikes in the great trial scene. Condemned to a house of correction, she calls out, 'Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light', and the sympathy of the spectator evidently goes out to her. It is again successfully appealed to when in her last moments she accepts the unavoidable fate by deciding:

I shall welcome death  
As princes do some great ambassador,  
I'll meet thy weapon half-way.

It would be difficult to find self-aggrandizement more outspokenly glorified.

Now, one cannot expect anything so conspicuous in the drama of the time to be wholly absent from Shakespeare's work. It has been shown elsewhere (cf. *Character Problems*

in *Shakespeare's Plays*, London, 1922; p. 40 seq.) that his plays contain indeed some problems which are insoluble without reference to this particularity. Julius Caesar, for instance, indulges to such an extent in self-praise that it has created the erroneous impression of his character being intended as that of a braggart. But the truth is that Shakespeare makes use of the privilege of the drama of the time that a hero may divulge his great qualities without being thought of as a boaster. This would never have been doubtful if the other great figures in Shakespeare's dramatic work did the same. On the whole, however, Shakespeare's psychological realism and his subtle ethical feeling prevent him from following the beaten track. There is, in fact, scarcely anything that separates his art more distinctly from that of dramatists like Jonson and Chapman. On the other hand his heroes belong to the same heroic world as those of his contemporaries. They are not vainglorious, and they do not blow their own trumpet. But they all of them know their worth to an astonishing degree. Consciousness of their greatness sometimes upholds them in adversity. They would not please the audience if they lacked the majestic bearing which seems to be almost the only merit in some characters of the other playwrights. (How highly it is rated is to be seen in the example of King Lear. His exalted attitude is most strongly emphasized throughout the play. The man who says of himself that he is 'every inch a king' radiates 'greatness'. 'You have that in your countenance which I would fain call master' Kent says to him. Then Lear questions: 'What is that?' and Kent replies: 'Authority.' The passage shows Shakespeare's superior technique, for in this way the audience is imperceptibly led to take the king fully as seriously as he takes himself. Besides, as regards the high opinion of his person, Lear, as we tried to show in the beginning, is above everything a representative of the passion of wrath, and in the opinion of the time, as Miss Campbell has pointed out, the anger of the choleric man is necessarily proportionate to his self-

esteem.) So, if the passion of choler on a grand scale has to be made plausible, one cannot wonder at the complementary trait not being absent. It is more remarkable, still, that a man like Othello, whom nobody will accuse of self-complacency, when his confidence in his young wife breaks down and he becomes a prey to despair, should find some consolation in the idea that what fate has inflicted upon him is

the plague of *great ones*;  
Prerogated are they less than the base.

Experience shows that the emphasis laid upon this feature by the dramatist has resulted in serious misunderstandings. Dostoevsky, for instance, is so much led astray by it that he denies Othello's jealousy at all, and contrasts him with what he thinks is the *real* jealous person, who 'hides himself under tables, bribes the lowest sort of people, and makes friends with dirtiest espionage'. But the great Russian naturalist entirely misunderstands Shakespeare's intention, which was to create a hero who, for all his weakness in the matter of jealousy, never falls so low as to lose his dignity. Shakespeare's other heroes show analogous natures. Hamlet, too, in spite of his constant dejection and his violent self-accusations sticks to a very high opinion of himself. This is more than anywhere else revealed in the closet scene where he assumes a moral superiority towards the queen, his mother, which borders on self-righteousness and priggishness ('Forgive me this my virtue,' &c.). Macbeth's contemptuous gesture in declining 'to play the Roman fool' betrays a similar mind.

It is scarcely necessary to indicate the enormous difference between pride in Shakespeare's heroes and in those of the others. It is true that sometimes, on the face of it, they show a certain similarity. Bussy d'Ambois, in wanting to die no less glorious a death than Emperor Vespasian, reminds us of Hamlet's friend Horatio exclaiming in a critical moment: 'I am more an antic Roman than a Dane!' But owing to the persuasive power of Shakespeare's art we

recognize the attitude of the one as heroism overdone and trust the other to speak nothing but objective truth. The same holds good for his other characters. They prove their heroic qualities in the first line by their actions. In a tragedy such as *Macbeth* quite a number of scenes towards the end of the tragedy seem to serve this special purpose. Thus it becomes evident that Heroism, like many other dramatic ingredients, has suffered in Shakespeare's hands a remarkable 'sea-change': instead of hypertrophic self-esteem and pompous majestic pose, we find in his plays a high degree of a well-founded, innate, and indestructible dignity. Much of the tragic effect of Shakespeare's heroes depends on this very trait.

We have tried to show in this paper that in the physiognomy of Shakespeare's tragic heroes there is to be observed a certain, if sometimes comparatively faint, family likeness to those of the other dramatists of his time, or rather that some general principles prevailing in his period are to be found among others as well as in him. In the main there are three of them. Their common root is the tendency to be—in the words of the painter in *Timon of Athens*—'livelier than life'. First of all there is the striving after heightening the figure of the hero by extraordinary intensification of the emotion, there is secondly a predilection for what in Elizabethan language is termed the 'fantastical'; namely eccentricity, extravagance, or oddity which could be summed up as the *bizarre*, and there is thirdly, owing to a partiality for the majestic, an inclination to favour the representation of a certain self-exalting attitude. With the registering of these three traits the phenomena indicated in the title are, it is true, still not exhaustively characterized. Several important aspects have not been touched upon. But the points we have dealt with are at any rate such as to be most distinctly at variance with the otherwise realistic characterization of individuals in the drama of the time. In putting them in relief one must face the charge of having made an arbitrary selection of a few extreme

examples. It is, however, the extreme cases that best show the general tendencies of the time. Not before these tendencies are fully grasped can we hope to come to a right understanding of the intention and consequently of the particular merits of the single plays.

Whether these characteristics should be designated by the vague term 'baroque' is after all a question of minor importance. However, their agreement with the fundamentals of this style as it appears elsewhere compels us more or less to assign them to it. Of special interest from the standpoint of Shakespearian research is, of course, the question how much of them is to be found in him, if his work is compared with that of the others. Now we have seen that a comparison of this kind yields the interesting result that Shakespeare's general aims do not differ so greatly from those of the others; only his means of attaining them are infinitely superior to theirs, and although, for instance, the extravagant is given a prominent part in his art, he is on the whole always to be found on the side of the natural—the word being used in a relative sense—as opposed to the mannered or artificial.

Perhaps it was this characteristic too, besides his want of learning, that led to the verdict of contemporary criticism, to the judgement of a Jonson or Drayton who recognized it as his most salient quality that he followed *Nature*, and it was not only the pride bred of classical education but also a certain antagonism with regard to artistic principles that prompted Beaumont's haughty words, in which appreciation is mingled with condescension, that Shakespeare went far 'by the dim light of Nature'.

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